

Caring for Poinsettias

By Kathy Ruiz

UCCE / El Dorado County Master Gardener

Draft for December 7, 2011

Nothing says the holidays like a beautiful poinsettia, known botanically as *Euphorbia pulcherrima*.

Poinsettias are natives of Mexico and Central America. They were first brought to the US in the 1820s by Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first American ambassador to Mexico. The plants bear his name today; certainly easier to say than their Aztec name – cuitlaxochitl. In their native habitat, poinsettias are perennial shrubs that can grow to be 10 feet tall. The poinsettias you purchase today around the holidays have been specially bred to grow in pots and for various shades of color.

The colorful leaves on the poinsettia are often confused for the flowers. These leaves are called bracts. The flowers are the very small yellow budlike nubs in the center of the plant. With proper care, poinsettias will last well through the holiday season and can even be forced to bloom again.

Here are some things to consider when purchasing your poinsettia to ensure that it is long lived and looks its best throughout the season. First, check the true flowers located at the base of the colorful bracts. The flowers should be green or red-tipped and fresh looking. If yellow pollen is covering the flowers, the plant may not hold up as well. The plant should have green foliage down to the soil line. The bracts should be completely colored. Avoid plants that have a large margin of green around the edges of the bract.

Care for your poinsettia by placing it near a sunny window. Water the plant only when the soil is dry and do not fertilize while it is in bloom. Don't let the decorative foil wrapping cover the drain holes in the pot and don't allow the plant to stand in water. Indoor temperatures should be between 60 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit for long plant life. Higher temperatures will shorten the life of the bracts. For best results place the poinsettia in a cool room (55 to 60 degrees) at night. Avoid temperature fluctuations and drafts.

Poinsettias can be made to re-flower, however, it takes a fairly strict regimen of yearlong care to obtain good results. Start by keeping the plant watered as normal after the holidays. Around April, begin to reduce watering to help the plant go dormant, but do not allow it to dry out so completely that the stems shrivel up. Around the middle of May, cut the stems back to about 4 to 6 inches above the soil line and repot it in a soil-less potting mixture. Water thoroughly. Keep the plant exposed to bright light but not in direct sunlight. When new growth appears, fertilize every two weeks with a weak solution of liquid houseplant fertilizer. In late spring (or after any danger of frost is past) move the plant outdoors to a shaded location. Encourage a fuller looking plant by pinching some of the new growth. Bring the plant back indoors in September to acclimate it for the next phase.

The poinsettias is a short-day plant, which means it requires short days (8-10 hours of daylight) and long nights (14-16 hours of complete darkness) to flower. To induce the poinsettia to flower by Christmas, growers suggest placing the plant in a closet or under an opaque box between the hours of 5 p.m. and 8 a.m., each day, starting in October. Keep the plant in a location where the temperature will not exceed 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Don't forget to move the plant to a sunny window during the day. Continue watering and fertilizing. The bracts should be showing color by Thanksgiving and in full color by mid-December. At this time discontinue fertilizing and enjoy your beautiful poinsettia.

Join Master Gardeners this Saturday, December 10th at 9 a.m. to learn how to plant and care for the many varieties of African Violets and other house plants. This free three-hour class will be held at the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.org/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.